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Albania expected to resume secret talks with Britain

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Secret talks in Paris between British and Albanian emissaries might open a chink in Albania's iron curtain, which Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin rolled down more than 40 years ago.

The talks center on a huge treasure in gold and the 1946 mining of two British warships. A new and fourth round of the talks is due soon. They began, diplomats say, just before the death last April of Enver Hoxha, Albania's Communist Party boss.

It would be exaggeration, according to Albania-watchers here and in London, to call these contacts a real break from Stalinist Albania's decades of isolation. Ramiz Alia, its new Communist Party first secretary, is an old-time companion of Hoxha and follows the policies Hoxha laid down.

Albania's cautious overtures to Greece's Socialist government, recent new trade talks with its former friend China, and admission of a few chosen Westerners are timid and still occasional moves.

Indeed, after breaking with the Soviets in 1961 and the Chinese in 1978, Albania's self-centered isolation — and possibly its economic difficulties — has grown. It is a country that needs friends.

The post-Hoxha regime's readiness to discuss claims with Britain may be a step toward easing the nation's isolation.

The talks concern two issues: Britain's claim for seamen and ships lost in 1946, and Albania's claim to 230,000 ounces of gold, which were reportedly looted by Nazi occupiers in World War II. The gold was recovered and has been held in trust by a gold commission of Britain, the United States, and France.

One factor that could affect the talks is the previously top-secret British and US attempts from 1949 to 1953 to overthrow Hoxha. These attempts, during President Truman's administration, were a kind of precedent for the larger-scale Bay of Pigs attempt against Cuba in 1960 and current efforts by US-backed anticommunist "contra" guerrillas against Nicaragua's leftist regime.

Lord Bethell, a British conservative, discloses in his book, "The Great Betrayal: The Untold Story of Kim Philby's Biggest Coup" how Britain's secret intelligence service, as well as Mr. Truman's secret Office for Policy Coordination and the Central Intelligence Agency, infiltrated about 100 keen but ill-trained anticommunist Albanian émigrés into Albania. He gives the precise names,

dates, and the personal accounts of those involved.

This was the first and only direct armed Western challenge to Stalin's East European empire. It ended in disaster, mainly writes Lord Bethell, because British intelligence agent and Soviet spy Harold (Kim) Philby, appointed by London to coordinate the operation with the US, gave all its details to the Soviets. (Mr. Philby admits this in his own boastful memoirs, published after fleeing from Beirut in 1963 to Moscow.)

The Albanians, landed from boats and dropped into Albania by parachute, had been initially trained and led by British operatives, some still living today. These Britons earlier helped Hoxha's partisans defeat the Germans and the Italians. About half of the émigrés were caught after landing — the Sigurimi, the Albanian secret police, had precise details about their arrival — and most were executed after show trials in Tirana.

The last group, sponsored by the US, infiltrated in 1953, were four members of exiled King Zog's royal guard, tried and executed in Albania in 1954.

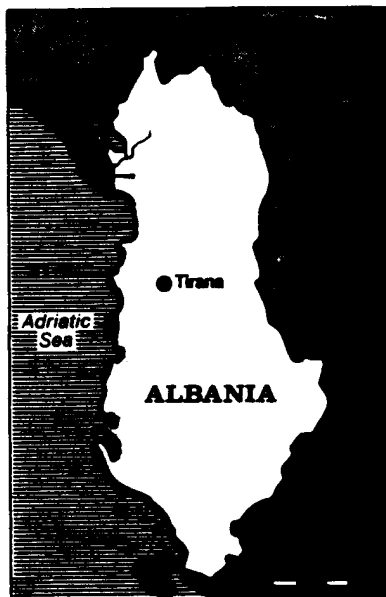
At issue in the present talks is Albania's desire to recover its looted gold, now estimated to be worth \$60 million.

Britain has refused to release the gold — US and French agreement would also be required — unless Albania recognizes and complies with a 1949 decision by the International Court of Justice at The Hague to pay Britain what would now be only token compensation, less than \$1 million, for the loss of 44 sailors and the two destroyers. The 1949-53 British and US-sponsored infiltrations were, in part, a kind of reprisal for the Corfu attack.

The incident began in May 1946. Two British destroyers were fired on, but not hit, by Albanian shore batteries in the same three-mile-wide channel between Corfu island and Albania's rocky coast where an unwary tourist in a motorboat was killed by an Albanian shore sentry's bullet in 1984 for approaching too close.

On Oct. 22, 1946, as thousands of Corfiotes watched from the sea wall, two British destroyers, the Saumarez and the Volage, challenged the Albanians' three-mile exclusion zone. They sailed into what they considered (and which the Albanians now tacitly recognize as) an international waterway. A mine tore the Saumarez apart. When the Volage tried to tow her to safety, a second mine blew off Volage's bow.

Tirana denied responsibility. A meeting of the UN Security Council blamed Albania for the British loss of life, but then Soviet UN delegate Andrei Gromyko vetoed the



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resolution which consequently had no effect. The World Court decision in 1949 condemned Albania. Ironically, it also found that Britain had violated Albanian sovereignty by sweeping 22 newly laid mines from the Corfu Channel in November 1946.

A mystery remained. Albanian had no minelaying ships of its own at the time.

In a final bizarre twist, an anti-Tito Yugoslav Navy lieutenant commander named Karel Kovacic defected across the Adriatic Sea to Italy in a small boat. He testified to seeing two Yugoslav minesweepers fully loaded with mines leave their base for Albanian waters just before the Oct. 22 explosions and return, empty, just afterward. Independent inquiries disclosed that the Yugoslav Navy, then a kind of communist big brother to Albania, was indeed the prime suspect.

Mr. Cooley, an ABC news correspondent based in London, is a former Monitor correspondent in the Middle East and Washington.